

# THE STONE GIRL

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She wasn't a stone girl at first, of course. Even after she was it wasn't something as you would notice right off. I came after it happened, so there wasn't any "befores" for me to be comparing but her sister said there wasn't much change to look at. Just one day to the next her skin getting colder, a little more solid.

I came when her sister finally allowed that she needed help with the work around the place. The stone girl still moved then, though she was slow. Deliberate, like she had to think where her arm should be next. Wasn't much could be done by her in the way of chores. She had told her sister this, the words coming one by one, dropping like pebbles in a pond. The sister asked in town the next day for help. I came directly; there wasn't anything that greatly held me to the place I had been. Truth be told, I wasn't much the kind that could be held. So I came, and if I wasn't expecting anything fine, well, then, I wasn't likely to be disappointed. That was how I figured. But they had a welcome for me, and a place prepared. They treated me nice, too, the sisters; I had a feathertick<sup>1</sup> fine as theirs, and we ate from the same kettle. The feathertick I pulled into the sleeping porch after the first few nights, seeing as it was a warm spring. That way I could be up and about in the mornings without having to go through and wake them. I didn't know for sure if the stone girl slept or not, but her sister I expected could use any rest that was offered her.

I asked early what the cause for all this might have been. It's not something I had ever heard tell of before, even living on the edge of the Marshes. The sister told me that one day the stone girl had come back to the house shivering and shaken. She hadn't been able to tell her sister

<sup>1</sup> feathertick: mattress filled with feathers

much, just that she had gotten tangled in some spellweb. Or maybe it was some bargain made by an old marsh wisewit that maybe didn't get paid off at the time and just sort of hung there until it caught the sleeve of the next person walking by. The stone girl didn't know, and her sister, though she studied on it, couldn't bring a better guess to it. Anywise, the sense and direction of it was clear: it was a Change Spell. What came was stone; what went was flesh. Or at least touch, warmth, receiving and reaching out. Those were flesh things.

That was why the lover left, the sister told me. He wept some and raged against the Marshes and against spellpowers in general and wisewits in particular, and he came and sat with the stone girl on the front stairs. After a while he came to realize that she couldn't feel it when he clasped her hand and complained over the unkindness of fate. Not too long after that he was walking out with another young woman. I saw them once when I was pulling Annie-go-courting<sup>2</sup> for the dyepot. They were careful not to walk out toward the Marshes, though, so I hadn't seen them after that. The sister was with me that one time, and I saw her turn her head until they were past.

"Maybe she don't feel it," she said, "but I do." I didn't ask her what she meant.

The once that I asked, the sister told me that the stone girl knew what was going to happen to her. Said she felt it somewhere inside, all wrote out like a book, only she didn't know the words for the whole of it. Maybe she did, and her sister was just chary<sup>3</sup> of relating it; it's not something I can know. Anywise, they're entitled to some secrets between them, if that's the way of it. What she did tell me was this: The stone girl would change, stone for flesh, until all of her was gone except the heart. Then when she died, her heart would turn into a beautiful bird and rise up singing. When the sister told me that, I tried to imagine such a bird. Maybe all of jewel colors, or red like the sun through the morning clouds.

"It might not be too long," she told me, "but even if it is, I'm bound to stay. She was proud, wouldn't beg me for it, but I know she wanted it. Wanted me to promise I'd stay and wait for that bird." She was silent for a stretch. "Ought to be some rare sight, that bird." We both of us sat awhile, looking at the clouds leaking color from the sun behind them. She made a little sound like the way the wind moves the rushgrass, and then we sat some more.

2 Annie-go-courting: name of a plant used to make dye

3 chary: cautious; wary

I was kind as I knew how to be with the stone girl, but it wasn't a thing that was easy. One day I felt a breeze coming up from the pond, and I went to put a big soft shawl around her. It was a thick patterned thing all in colors like the hues of marshflowers. The sister had made it. I had it mostly tucked in before it came to me that the stone girl probably couldn't feel it anyway. Neither shawl nor breeze, come to that. I stood there like a post for a bit, thinking, until the sister came into the room and caught me at it. Might be that my thoughts were writ large<sup>4</sup> on my face, or maybe the sister had the advantage of having gone over the same ground herself. Anywise, she knew what I was coming to understand, and how I felt about it. I let her draw me away and back onto the porch, and I let her tell me.

She said she expected I was right about the stone girl not being able to feel much any more, but she had thought this out and come to a resting place with it. "Maybe she's in there, feeling everything, and just can't speak of it to us. I'd rather we took the chance and offered comfort to her. I think she knows; she can still see and hear us some, I expect. And even if she can't feel it, it makes me no matter. It's still comfort to me." And after thinking on it I came to decide that she was right.

I was out on the steps of an evening counting stars when I heard the sister's loom stop. Her footsteps moved across to the stone girl's chair and then fell quiet. There was a moan like November wind, and a thump. I looked in to see the sister kneeling against the stone girl's chair, hugging her and weeping.

She looked up at me when I poked my head in. "I felt her Change," she said.

I looked at the stone girl. Her mouth was a little open, like she had been trying to say something.

"Is she dead?" I asked, coming into the circle of firelight.

"No," her sister said, continuing to stroke the unresponsive arm. "No. She's not quite to the other bank of the water yet." And she sat there, keeping vigil,<sup>5</sup> with her eyes clear and the tears falling like spring rain.

I went out on the steps again. The stars were still there. I sat and thought about birds with wings all of jewels and fire.

It ought to be a rare sight. I expect I'll stay and be witness to it. ∞

4 **writ large**: clearly or freely written

5 **vigil**: watch